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Rummaging Through Life's Rubbish (Or Digging Through Life's Dung) REFLECTIONS ON PHILIPPIANS 3:2-11

Ira J. Jolivet, Jr.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

It is obvious that in this familiar passage from Philippians chapter 3, Paul is making a comparison between “all things,” which he now considers to be *skubalon*, a term translated by the NRSV as “rubbish,” and the benefits inherent in “the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” In order to appreciate the subtle nuances of this comparison, we must consider, first of all, the range of possible meanings of the word *skubalon*, which forms the basis of the comparison. Second, we must define more precisely “all things,” which Paul claims that he formerly held in high esteem but now regards as *skubalon*. Finally, we must uncover the compelling force behind such a radical reevaluation.

Range of Meanings

The first matter can be dealt with rather easily. As a survey of the occurrences of *skubalon* in various contexts in the New Testament suggests, in the ancient Greek language the term could mean anything from table scraps to

“dust bunnies” to human or animal excrement. Even within the limited context of Philippians 3, *skubalon* gives rise to two basic meanings that are similar in a general sense and yet significantly dissimilar in more specific respects. On the one hand, such translations as the NRSV, the RSV, and Moffatt’s render the term as “rubbish” or “refuse.” The KJV, on the other hand, has Paul say, “I have suffered the loss of all things and do count them but dung.” This rendering is perhaps the most appropriate, since it conveys more precisely the two essential elements of *skubalon*, worthlessness and filth, thereby intensifying the graphic contrast that Paul is in the process of creating.

“All Things”

The contrast is further intensified when we define the “all things” that Paul once regarded highly but now considers to be as filthy and as worthless as dung. No doubt he is using this expression to refer to the assets or “gains” he listed in verses 4–6, since there he stated:

If anyone has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

In one sense, these assets may be viewed as mere “material things” in comparison to the more highly valued spiritual benefits that accrued to Paul as a newly converted Christian. In another sense, however, the contrast he is describing takes on deeper meaning when his former gains are considered from another perspective.

That perspective is afforded by Abraham Maslow's famous hierarchy of human behavioral needs, of which anyone who has had the benefit of an introductory college psychology course is most probably aware. According to Maslow, the most basic of these needs are physiological in nature. They include the needs for food, water, sleep, and any other such human bodily requirements. Having met these most basic of needs to a satisfactory degree, humans then seek to gratify the safety needs, including not only the desire to live in a secure physical environment, but also the more psychological longings for stability, structure, and order and for freedom from anxiety, chaos, and fear. Next on the hierarchy come the needs for belongingness and love. These are followed by the need for esteem, that is, for self-respect and the respect of other human beings. The fifth level on Maslow's hierarchy consists of the need for self-actualization, which is fulfilled only when an individual lives up to the potential within himself or herself, thus becoming what he or she is most fitted by nature to be. The final hierarchical category comprises the human desires to know, to understand, and to systematize the universe in which we live.

When the aspects of Paul's life listed in Philippians 3:4-6 are viewed from the vantage point of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, we begin to understand the significance of the "things" that Paul valued highly before his conversion and reappraised thereafter. In the first place, Paul's Pharisaic training placed him on a career path that insured that his physiological needs would be met throughout his life. This career path also afforded Paul the opportunity to fulfill several other basic human needs. His need for safety and security, for example, would no doubt have been gratified to a great degree by the Pharisees' strict adherence to the highly structured written laws and to the systematic oral traditions, which, according to Pharisaic teachings, formed a protective "hedge" around the Torah. Furthermore, Paul's study of the Torah would have fulfilled his need to know the universe, and his status as a Pharisee would certainly have given him esteem within his community, "the people of Israel," where he found a sense of love and belongingness. The esteem in which Paul perceived that he was held by that community is perhaps reflected in his statements that he was "of the tribe of Benjamin" and "a Hebrew born of Hebrews." Finally, Paul's claims that he was a zealous persecutor of the church and blameless as to righteousness under the law may be interpreted as indications that before his conversion he had

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indeed believed that he had attained his fullest potential as a human being. In other words, he had achieved the final level of Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, the need for self-actualization.

Viewing Paul's statements in Philippians 3:4-6 in this way allows us to propose that when he claims that he has suffered the loss of "all things" and counts them as rubbish/dung, he is not speaking of mere "material things," but rather of those facets of his life which contributed to the gratification of the basic needs that he and all human beings seek, whether consciously or unconsciously, to fulfill. The question that now begs to be answered is, what was the motivating force behind Paul's radical reevaluation of such significant aspects of his life?

Motivating Force

Paul himself provides a multilayered answer to that question in 3:7-11, which he begins with the claim, "Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ." In this context, the Greek preposition translated here as "because of" indicates the reason for Paul's change of mind.¹ Christ was the force that compelled him to reappraise the very essence of his humanity.

But what specific characteristics of the nature of Christ or of his redemptive activities brought about such a drastic change in Paul's attitude? He explains in the verses that follow. In 3:8a, for example, he goes on to state that he now considers "everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Here Paul attributes his new mental outlook to what may be safely rendered as the "knowledge of Christ Jesus." Once again, Paul's answer suggests a question. What exactly does this knowledge entail?

The answer may be deduced from Paul's statements in 3:10-11, in which he proclaims: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow

I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” For Paul, the revelation of the risen Lord opened the floodgates of an entirely new fount of divine knowledge. The “goal” (*telos*; cf. 3:12–14) of redeemed humanity is to be conformed to the likeness of the resurrected Jesus. It is only in the attainment of that goal that one achieves the fullest expression of human self-actualization. Furthermore, since Jesus did not achieve the goal by meticulous adherence to the letter of the law, but through humble submission to God’s will in the incarnation and death on the cross (2:5–11), then the righteousness of the law is indeed mere rubbish or dung.

Paul’s purposes in describing the mental changes that he experienced as a result of his encounter with and reflections on the risen Christ had practical implications for his intended audience, the members of the church at Philippi. These people faced discouragement as a result of the news of Paul’s recent imprisonment and the very real threat that they themselves might suffer like persecution by governmental authorities at the instigation of Jewish opposition. Paul encourages the members of the church to follow his example (3:17) as he shares in the sufferings of Christ so that he might also attain his resurrection. To them Paul holds out the goal that one day the Lord Jesus Christ “will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself” (3:21).

Paul’s statements in Philippians 3 also have relevance for a contemporary audience of Christians who are facing neither governmental persecution nor opposition by those zealous for the preservation of Jewish traditions. Paul was a human being who subconsciously sought to fulfill the basic needs of all humans within the context of first-century Judaism. His training as a Pharisee fulfilled his physiological and esteem needs and his need to know and understand the universe. The Mosaic law and the oral traditions provided the structure and order necessary to give him a sense of safety and security in the midst of a chaotic world. His ties to the Jewish community gratified his needs for love and belongingness. And his ability to perform the requirements of the law, along with his zeal for the preservation of his Jewish traditions, allowed him to achieve a degree of self-actualization.

Knowledge of Christ and his resurrection changed everything for Paul. He devalued the significance of ad-

herence to the law, which necessarily resulted in forfeiture of his status as a Pharisee and in alienation from the community that still held the law in high esteem. But for Paul, that did not matter because he understood that all his needs were now being fulfilled by God. His physiological needs were being satisfied by the churches, which replaced the Jewish community as providers of a sense of love and belonging. The fulfillment of the need for safety and security arose now, not from a highly structured legalistic politico-religious system nor from the governmental protection afforded an established and officially sanctioned religion, but from a deep trust in the one who raised Jesus from the dead. Paul’s esteem came from understanding that spreading the gospel of universal salvation was the greatest vocation to which one could aspire and that eventually God would praise him for his work. And no doubt Paul felt somewhat self-actualized in the realization that he was helping people to achieve salvation, at the same time understanding that he would only reach his fullest potential when he finally attained to the ultimate goal, the resurrection from the dead.

Some Christians today are much like Paul before his encounter with the risen Lord. They think that they are serving God when, in reality, they are subconsciously seeking to fulfill their basic human needs. Some people, for example, gravitate to Christian traditions that, like first-century Judaism, tend to be highly structured and legalistic. Often what these people are trying to do is gratify their needs for safety and security in a world that is threatened by chaotic elements. Other individuals attempt to fulfill their needs for esteem by seeking out perceived positions of leadership in churches for the sole purpose of exercising authority over other individuals. In any case, the lesson to be learned from Philippians chapter 3 is that a profound understanding of the resurrection of Jesus should cause all of us to realize that those who spend their limited time on earth striving to fulfill human needs are truly expending all their energies on what amounts to rummaging through life’s rubbish. Or, in stronger terms suggested by Paul’s language, those who devote their lives to the fulfillment of such needs are, in reality, merely digging through life’s dung.

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